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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 001178

SIPDIS

SAN JOSE FOR BLINK

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: GREY SKIES OVER TEGUCIGALPA: SMOG SHUTS DOWN  
AIRPORT AND CHOKES CITY RESIDENTS

1. Summary: Smoke from agricultural and forest fires, combined with clouds, haze, and air pollution, blanketed Tegucigalpa in smog for more than six weeks from late March to early May. Tegucigalpa's international airport shut down partially or completely on an almost daily basis in April due to low visibility, with flights grounded, cancelled, or rerouted. The decreased air traffic had a negative impact on local businesses, and the smog also affected residents' health, with hospitals and the health unit at Post reporting an increase in smog-related illnesses. End summary.

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WHERE THERE'S SMOKE  
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2. Honduras's perennial problem with air pollution is seasonally amplified when farmers burn their fields in March and April in preparation for the next planting. The GOH estimates that agricultural burning makes up 75% of the fires; however, agricultural fires also set off forest fires, particularly as the burning coincides with the last weeks of the dry season, before the rainy season begins in May. There have been more than 500 forest fires to date in Honduras this year, covering approximately 330 square miles of land. The smoke from these crop and forest fires combines with air pollution and becomes trapped over Tegucigalpa, which is climactically and geographically susceptible to thermal inversions. When there are no strong winds at higher elevations to clear the air, the smog hangs over the city like a pall for weeks on end, until the winds pick up or the rains come. In April, the GOH released 15 million lempiras (approx. \$800,000) in emergency funds to bolster fire-fighting efforts in 35 municipalities at high risk for forest fires. However, these efforts had a minimal impact on the fires this season, as the funds were released weeks after the burning began. In addition, farmers are prone to re-start fires if their fields have not been sufficiently cleared; even in areas where fires were temporarily extinguished, the farmers re-ignited the fires the following day.

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FLYING BLIND  
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3. Between mid-April and the first week of May, Toncontin, Tegucigalpa's international airport, was completely closed due to smog for 4 days, partially closed for 9 days, and entirely operable for only 3 days, according to airport manager Carlos Cervantes. Toncontin presents a challenge in the best weather conditions, with an approach requiring pilots to come in high over the mountains and then circle the city to reduce altitude before landing. Visibility must be at least 3km for Toncontin to operate; during the burning season this year, smog reduced visibility to 1-2 km, shutting down the airport for hours at a time. Rigoberto Alverenga, General Manager of Continental Airlines in Honduras, reported that Continental, which requires a minimum visibility of 4.5-5km, cancelled more than 8 flights over a two-week period. Both Continental and American Airlines re-routed some flights to San Pedro Sula, a four-hour drive from the capital; however, San Pedro Sula's airport, along with Honduras's other two airports, also experienced temporary closings and flight delays due to smog. Officials estimate that the airports lost approximately \$300,000 over a four-day period at the end of April. The U.S. Air Force recently entered into an agreement with the Honduran civil aviation authority to design a GPS approach to Toncontin, which in the future could help prevent or reduce airport closings by reducing the visibility required to land. However, the implementation of the agreement will not take effect until after this year's smoke season.

4. The GOH is analyzing the possibility of using Soto Cano Airbase, located 82 km from Tegucigalpa, as an alternate airport during the months of heavy smoke. Although the Honduran air force owns the installation, the U.S. military currently operates out of one part of Soto Cano and provides resources such as power, water, and waste treatment to the entire base, as well as maintenance of the airfield facilities. President Ricardo Maduro announced that he

would consider converting Soto Cano into a commercial airport; however, he did not give a time frame for his decision or discuss the infrastructure requirements such a conversion would entail. Post does not support this proposal and doubts its viability, given the significant economic costs of base conversion and the security concerns about current base operations.

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UP IN SMOKE  
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15. The decrease in air traffic caused by smog had a corresponding effect on other businesses in Tegucigalpa. The larger chain hotels, such as the Marriott and Intercontinental, reported a 20-40% drop in occupancy over the last few weeks of April, due to the inability of business travelers to land in Tegucigalpa. Conferences and meetings at the hotels also had to be cancelled, according to Glenn Simon, General Manager of the Marriott. Upscale restaurants as well as smaller businesses such as airport taxis similarly suffered from the absence of business travelers, who make up the majority of international visitors to Tegucigalpa. However, the smog had a positive effect on certain businesses. Ground transportation companies connecting Tegucigalpa to San Pedro Sula and other cities in the region with functioning airports, such as San Salvador, experienced a steadily increasing demand for their services. Also, some local tour companies in Tegucigalpa benefited from travelers being stranded in the city while waiting for the airport to re-open, reported Victor Melgar, of Grayline Tours Houduras.

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16. The smog also seriously affected the health of Tegucigalpa's citizens. Tegucigalpa's largest hospital, Hospital Escuela, experienced a one-hundred-percent increase in admissions due to smog-related ailments, such as skin rashes, headaches, conjunctivitis, and respiratory illnesses. The Honduran Ministry of Health estimated that a third of all cases seen at local hospitals at the end of April involved respiratory problems caused or complicated by the smoke and air pollution. The health unit at Post also reported an increase in cases of bronchitis, asthma, and allergy-related symptoms. Local schools suspended or modified physical education classes to limit children's exertion outside; similarly, many recreational activities for children at Post were cancelled throughout April and the beginning of May.

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